From Ipazia, Imaginary City, to Cairo, Oriental City: Strange Similarities

Anna Madoeuf

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Anna Madoeuf
Maître de conférences en Géographie,
Université François-Rabelais de Tours,
Laboratoire CITERES, Équipe EMAM (Monde Arabe et Méditerranée)

This article examines a new perspective comparing the depictions of imaginary cities taken from Invisible Cities *by Italo Calvino with Oriental cities such as those described by 19th-century travellers (Pierre Loti, Gérard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert). From the virtual Ipazia to the Oriental city of Cairo viewed through the prism of* The Arabian Nights*, one observes a similarity in the way cities and women, mysterious and obsessing, show themselves to—or hide themselves from—the eyes of the voyager-voyeur looking for conquests. Through effects of superimposition, the visibility and the types of female figures are linked to their inclusion in the décor of a particular city.*
Even today, in an entirely different register, that of Arab culture, Cairo is a suggestive city with a variety of connotations. The image of the Egyptian capital, as never before, associates women with places. Cairo is a city of inspiration for literature (Naguib Mahfouz, Gamal Ghitany, Yehia Haqqi, Youssef Idris), the cinema (Youssef Chahine, Yousri Nasrallah), and music (Umm Kalthûm). Icons, effigies, muses, images, voices, solid forms, silhouettes, and even apparitions: it offers, in a variety of ways, a compilation of forms of the presence of, or references to, the portrayal of women.

Key words: city, imaginary, literature, representations, Cairo, the Orient, woman

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"There comes a time when a man, having ridden for many a day over rough ground,
longs for a town."
—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Introduction

Oriental cities, for Westerners, are haunted by women, or even more by their absences

and their veils. It is this absence and this dissimulation that make them even more obsessing—to guess what is hiding behind the veil or behind the walls in those enclosed houses. The mystery sets fire to the imagination: a shadow, a look, a *mashrabiya,* women and cities are superimposed on each other and invent themselves, as witness the characters of Aziyadé of Constantinople (Loti [1879] 1989), Suleïma of Oran (Loti [1882] 2000), or Zaynab of Cairo (De Nerval [1851] 1980), based on a woman from a harem, a courtesan, and a slave. These are characters who symbolize extremely fantasized worlds and erotically connoted roles. Three strange and foreign cities, three types of women. This configuration reminds us of Ipazia, Despina, and Anastasia, the three invisible cities of Italo Calvino (1996) in which feminine characters are the most present and the most suggestive.

In another style, Cairo is nowadays a literary Itu, and Naguib Mahfouz has made many heroines famous, including the archetypes of Amina (the impeccable wife and mother) and Hamida (the young debauched woman)—each symbolizing a register of expression, a behavioural model, but also one of the facets of the city.

In this essay, women are evoked, but these are not women in the flesh but simply ideas and images of women—icons, fictional characters, effigies, muses, and ideal or exceptional women. From Ipazia to Cairo, it is through a compilation of characters of women in the city, feminine characters of the city, that we will explore one of the dimensions of the fantasized universe of the imaginary city and the Oriental city.

The Trilogy of *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino

We begin with a slanted re-reading and a search for the different forms of visibility of women in Calvino's imaginary cities. If all these cities with female names are strewn with women, three of them evoke women in a more explicit way. Along with the city they live in, they are presented, in the scenery and the settings, as existing only in relation to the traveller, in relation to what he is looking at and searching for. Here they are in crescendo, from looking to touching and from voyeurism to carnal relations:

- Despina, "with its ground floor windows lit up, in each a woman doing her hair" (Calvino 1996, 23). Despina is a sort of showcase, a display city, neutral, even if founded on the repetitive, almost rhythmic presence of women exposed and

exposing their attributes, in this case their hair, mechanically combed in a sequential décor accentuated by exhibitionist facades. Here one is unable to distinguish the inside from the outside; it is merely a kind of tracking shot of windows framing the upper halves of women. In Despina, women make themselves beautiful, and one sees them in the process of doing so.

- Anastasia, which "speaks of women that I saw bathing in a garden pool and who sometimes—it is said—invite the passer-by also to take off their clothes and chase them in the water" (Calvino 1996, 17). Here the city is suggestive: the possibility of erotic water games and frolicking with no discussion. Anything is possible. It is an outdoor bathing scene and an evocation of the odalisques. Here the women are making themselves clean; one can approach them and perhaps brush against them.
- Lastly, Ipazia, where "you must enter the stables and the arena to see the beautiful women riding with naked thighs with gaiters on their calves. Should a young stranger approach them, he is knocked over in the straw or sawdust and pressed firmly against their breast" (Calvino 1996, 60). The latter is perhaps an ideal city: women here are simply made of flesh, Amazons with vigorous bodies. Here they are consenting, even enterprising, and one can have carnal knowledge of them.

These three cities describe as many forms of female presence and attitude, as well as the successive gradations from passivity to activity in the way women offer themselves to the traveller, who is always lying in wait and looking for urban experiences of love and intrigue.[1] These three scenes show how the place creates the woman and vice versa, how the woman becomes a model, a sketch or drawing associated with a genre. Women at the window are treated as flat images without depth, and women bathing or on horseback are presented in a choreography of restless bodies in motion.

It is apparent that these sketches, even if they refer to an imaginary universe, can still correspond with the recollection of other pieces of literature. They can also perhaps suggest a certain duplicity between women and cities, and can bring to light the role of female mediators in helping each to understand the other.

Types of Cities and Types of Women

From Ipazia to Cairo, a compilation of figures of women in the city and female figures of the city will be presented. Within this framework, women will be evoked, although these are not women in the flesh but simply ideas and images of women, icons, fictional characters, effigies, muses, ideal or exceptional women. However, the city that accommodates them, or perhaps creates them, is real. It is indeed a real city: it is Cairo.[2]

Cairo is a literary city, and the Nobel Prize–winning Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006) created several famous heroines, among them the archetypes of Amina, the irreproachable wife and mother (Mahfouz 1985), and Hamida, the depraved young woman (Mahfouz 1970). Each symbolizes a register of expression, a behavioural model, an entity and an identity of the capital: an ancient city (Oriental—traditional—chaste) versus a new city (modern—Western—licentious).

Amina's only transgression, the only time she goes beyond the rights given to her by her husband, is when she goes furtively to pray in the mosque of al-Husayn. Even though she lives nearby, she knows only the minaret that she sees from her terrace, which to her is a permanent temptation. Hamida aspires to other urban horizons and wants to leave her neighbourhood in the old city and enter the other side of the capital, the modern city. She is able to do so only by means of prostitution. As opposed as these models may seem, both testify to the perversity of the relationship between women and cities and to women's incapacity to control or curb their greed, their longings for the city, albeit very different. The tempting influence of the city on women is also evident in the short story "The Mermaid" (*La Sirène*) by Youssef Idris (1986), in which a young bride from the country responds to the call of the city, leaves her husband, and disappears in the capital that appears to have bewitched her. Here, the city is a den of iniquity for women, which is a very old story if one considers the association of Babylon, allegedly the oldest city in the world, with the "oldest profession."

Having set out to conquer the city, women have been able to make their way, directly or more insidiously, into the cafés that were once veritable male bastions. This demonstrates the evolution of social practices and the metamorphosis of the city. Even if they do not physically enter ordinary cafés, women do not hesitate to make virtual incursions, joining their husbands there—or persecuting them there—by telephone (see

Ghitany 1993). Furthermore, they also now go to hybrid cafeteria-style establishments.

Women have also contributed to making Cairo a city of women, in a Fellinian way, by pushing men into exile, as Gamal Ghitany shows in *Epistle of Destinies* (1993). In fact, the city and women are complementary, but both are equally difficult of access. In order to obtain love legitimately—that is, through marriage—one must settle down, find a dwelling, along with furniture and electrical appliances. Women are expensive, especially those in the city who take advantage of the need for numerous accessories that require substantial financial investment. When one loves a woman and wants to live in this city, one must leave both to emigrate and work in a foreign country. Another evidence of the duplicity of women and cities is found in the fact that if a woman strives for marriage and a man, once he is committed to her (engaged or married) she pushes him to emigrate to get rich while she remains, alone, mistress of the place.

In a more distant manner, another author, Sonallah Ibrahim, simply shows that today the average city dweller may be a woman. When Ibrahim describes the destinies and vagaries of contemporary Egypt, Cairo is chosen as backdrop and the character of Zeth as symbol (Ibrahim 1993). Zeth's analyses and perceptions as a woman form the framework of the narrative. Zeth embodies the city because, as a woman, she is there subject to more numerous and diverse pressures. We are talking here about an ordinary woman of Cairo (middle-class, married with three children, working in an office), of her daily life, of the simple activities that punctuate it, of the energy she needs to handle it, of the common experience of exhaustion and disillusionment. The two decades (1970-80) in which Zeth lives show the decomposition of her social and urban environment, with the metamorphosis of structures, habits, and attitudes that she tries to assimilate and follow. A typical example is that Zeth wears a veil in order to be seen and, especially, to be well thought of. This does not, of course, spare her from being groped on the bus, which is always packed. Faced with the degradation of her family's condition and lifestyle, she is the one who looks for ingenious, if unsuccessful, ways to improve their situation, while her husband remains helpless in the face of their social failure.

Another, more explicit form of powerlessness is the mysterious illness that affects the male inhabitants of the cul-de-sac Zaafarâni, a Cairo microcosm conjured up by Gamal Ghitany (1997). Men's virility is affected, and they are victims of sexual

impotence. This might be the result of the multiplicity and intensity of the women's desires: they are exclusive, voracious, and great consumers; their material, financial, and sexual needs can never be met. The men can no longer face them, or face up to them. In this encounter orchestrated by the contemporary city, men are destroyed and humiliated. It is women, therefore, by means of their multifaceted voracity, who become central by imposing themselves on the city that has become their universe.

Urban Superimpositions: Voices, Bodies, and Images of Women

Moroccan writer Mohammed Berrada (2001), in his book about his years in Cairo in the 1950s, emphasizes the difficulty of imagining Cairo without the novels of Naguib Mahfouz and the songs of Umm Kalthûm, and thus of distinguishing, in this city, between reality and what has been read, heard, seen personally, or seen on TV.

Associated with the Nasser years, of which she was a symbol, Umm Kalthûm (1900–1975), "The Fourth Pyramid of Egypt," "Star of the Orient," dominated the Cairo scene from 1930 until her death. Her expressions, gestures, and accessories have been copied by numerous artists, but, more than a fashion, it was a language, a means of expression, and a style that she invented, in a register blending love and the divine by associating classicism and modernity. Her influence was such that many singers throughout the Arab world came to Cairo to train with her and to be inspired by the diva. This influence contributed to making Cairo the artistic stage of the Arab world.

For many years, on the first Thursday of each month,[3] Umm Kalthûm songs, which were broadcast on the radio (Sawt al-Qahira, literally "the voice of Cairo"), were listened to with reverence, and they changed the Arab world. "From the gulf to the ocean," the voice of Cairo was hers. During her funeral, in February 1975, the performer who had emptied the streets of Cairo when her concerts aired filled them with one of the largest crowds ever seen in the Egyptian capital. After her death, in 1976, a radio station was created in her name, and every day at 5:00 p.m. one of her performances is re-broadcast. In Cairo, the diva has her café and her museum, and she continues to have an important place in the sounds of the capital. But Umm Kalthûm was not *a* woman; she was "the lady" (*al-sett, al-sett al-kul*).

There is another important female figure in Cairo, one who in the past was

confiscated by the power of Nasser but who is recognized by common consensus to have also drawn crowds, to have taken a place in public life, and to have transgressed and transcended the curfew that was in force; this figure is the Virgin Mary. The appearances of the Blessed Virgin can be seen as another model of the ideal woman who combines purity and maternity. Her illuminated silhouette was seen repeatedly (by Christians and Muslims alike) in the evening sky above the dome of a church in the Zaytoun neighbourhood, over a period of several months in 1968 and 1969.[4] These silent, illuminated visions in the capital perhaps helped to comfort and pacify the Egyptian public after the humiliating defeat of 1967, and unified the nation that had been harmed by that ordeal.

Another way in which a female effigy is superimposed on the urban landscape is that presented by Berrada (1993), who cannot talk of the Bâb al-Hadid square in Cairo (in front of the railway station) without instantly seeing superimposed on this scene the silhouette of the curvaceous, sensual, and beautiful Hind Rostom, unforgettable heroine of Youssef Chahine's 1958 cult film *Bab el hadid* (*Cairo Station*).

If one is looking for fashionable women in Cairo today, the ones seen in pictures, on television, on movie screens, painted or advertised on billboards in the city centre, or in magazines, one might think of Yousra,[5] the very popular actress who embodies seduction and sex appeal. Yousra is no Lolita but a woman of fullness—fullness of form and of age; an absolute woman. In the film *Marcides* by Yousry Nasrallah (1993), her interpretation in fact takes on an incestuous tone when she plays the roles of both the hero's mother and his mistress.

Oriental Women for Oriental Cities

Finally, as one associates cities and women, the portrayals gather strength by association and crossing over. To the Western world, Cairo, as a city, has also become an archetype of the Oriental city, that of *The Arabian Nights.* The first translation of this work, by Antoine Galland, published at the beginning of the 18th century,[6] was very successful and drew many visitors to Cairo. Many of these visitors wrote about relationships formed on their travels, often influenced by *The Arabian Nights*. Among those who wrote travel diaries were René de Chateaubriand, Charles Didier, Arthur

Gobineau, Carles des Perrières, and Gustave Flaubert. Flaubert's correspondence indicates a pronounced taste for what today is known as sexual tourism.[7] Their writings never fail to mention the theme of "women of Cairo," which is in fact the title of the chapter that Gérard de Nerval dedicated to Egypt in his book *Voyage en Orient* ([1851] 1980). The influence of *The Arabian Nights* on travel literature is evident, but this work also influenced other forms of literature. Théophile Gautier was directly inspired by these tales and entitled one of his short stories, published In *Le musée des familles* en 1842, "La mille et deuxième nuit" (Gautier [1842] 2003).[8] The narrative takes place in Cairo, where three women are staged: Scheherazade, her companion Dinarzade, and the Peri, who appears in three guises (the princess Ayesha, Leila the fugitive slave, and the Peri in its divine aspect) that are "less characters than images of beauty."[9]

For Westerners, Oriental cities are haunted by women—or, rather, by their absence or their veils. It is this absence and this dissimulation that make them even more haunting and desirable. The city itself is secret, in the image of a labyrinth; the tortuous streets allow few extended views, and as for the houses, one sees only the exteriors, with their high walls and concealed openings. The challenge is therefore to discover, or guess, what is hiding behind the veil, or behind the walls of these enclosed houses. The mystery sets fire to the imagination; women and cities are superimposed and invent each other, from a silhouette, a look, a *mashrabiya*, or a narrow winding street.

The dominant Western stereotypes of the Orient are the concealed city (Depaule 1985) and the hidden woman. Both are elusive, neither is seen directly, but each ultimately offers herself to the traveller. Oriental cities and Oriental women, in this way, become inseparable. They are sublimated and moulded by these fusions, like Pierre Loti's Aziyadé and Constantinople ([1879] 1989) or Suleïma and Oran ([1882] 2000), or Gérard de Nerval's Zaynab and Cairo ([1851] 1980). These three pairs of women and cities represent, respectively, a woman from a harem, a courtesan, and a slave. They are characters that symbolize extremely fantasized worlds and erotically connoted roles.

Three strange and foreign cities, and three types of women. This configuration is another reminder of the invisible cities of Ipazia, Despina, and Anastasia. The Oriental city is the city of all chimeria that can make up an elementary triangular combination and

a basic framework combining the three types.

Cities and women: one is a metaphor of the other, and vice versa, and both demonstrate duplicity. Their relationship, often one of complicity, is always special, as is shown by these few illustrations of the city's capacity to generate its own characters, by the intervention of the Creator, a creator, a collective desire, or by still other means. Well-disposed, the city lets itself be conquered by women. On earth, as in heaven, on the walls, on the airwaves, women are everywhere in every form, sometimes without form or superimposed. And even when they are not there, they are still present. They have made the city, as much by their presence as by their absence, be they on display or hidden away, their kingdom real or virtual, because they exist in an obsessive way, not as beings but as creatures of men's imaginary, in this universe, allegorical too, but their own: the universe of the city.

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1 This stage setting in which the context determines the story, also evokes a completely different kind of literature, notably the SAS series by Gérard de Villiers, novels always situated in a city that gives its name to the title (*SAS in Cairo*, *SAS in Bangkok*, etc.) and in which the urban and erotic intrigues are linked.

2 Cairo itself is not neutral. It belongs notoriously to the feminine gender, revealing its dominant representations. It is often the case that cities, in their enunciations (especially in the Latin languages and in Arabic), in their representations (think of Raymond Queneau's Zazie, who, at the sight of the Eiffel Tower, doubts the alleged femininity of Paris). In its namings and qualifications, Cairo is articulated femininely. It is a city (*une ville* in French and *al-madina* in Arabic are feminine words); it is Al-Qâhira (paradoxically transcribed as *Le Caire,* with a masculine article in French), literally "the triumphant," or even Umm al-Dunia (the mother of the world, of life), as her inhabitants call her. This womb-city seems to have brought forth her own country, as she is also *Masr* (which indicates Cairo but also Egypt, *Misr*). Egypt is also allegorically feminine, perhaps because she embodies an agrarian civilization (values bound to the earth, fecundity, stability).

3 From 1928 to 1972, the concert given by Umm Kalthûm on the first Thursday of each month was broadcast on the radio.

4 These multiple apparations were acknowledged by the Coptic episcopate on 4 May 1968.

5 Born in 1955, Yousra has made about 30 films and has been featured in numerous television ad campagins.

6 Antoine Galland (1646–1715) was a professor at the Collège de France and an Orientalist; he was the first European translator of *The Arabian Nights*.

7 See *Cinq lettres d'Egypte* (Flaubert [c. 1849] 2002), letters he wrote during his stay in Egpyt to his friend Louis Bouilhet.

8 Literally "the thousand and second night"; *The Arabian Nights* is known in French as *Les Mille et une nuits* ("The Thousand and One Nights").

9 Romain Pehel, in his afterword to the edition of *Mille et une nuits* (p.51) in which he underlines “as Foucault states in his *Histoire de la sexualité, l’Ars erotica* des *Mille et une nuits* a destabilise l’Occident dans son rapport au sexe"